DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 684 CS 213 563

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TITLE Deconstruction Literary Theory and a Creative Reading of "The Great Gatsby."
PUB DATE 26 Nov 91
NOTE 10p.; English 500 paper, Bradley University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Undetermined (040)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Characterization; *Creative Thinking; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; *Reader Text Relationship; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Reading; *Deconstruction; Derrida (Jacques); *Great Gatsby; Literary Theory; Narrative Text; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

Through the mid-1980s, resistance to contemporary literary theory (especially Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction) took the form of a bitter debate that enlivened literary journals and Modern Language Association meetings. The debate continues even today, with traditional literary critics rejecting deconstruction as nihilistic and progressive critics and composition teachers enthusiastically embracing the theory because of its philosophical and pedagogical parallel with the process-oriented methods of New Rhetoric. In deconstruction, the reader sets out to find the dualities and deception, the gaps and cracks in a text, expecting all the while to find a deep fissure that Derrida characterizes as "the abyss." Deconstructionist strategies can be used to analyze "The Great Gatsby," a work of lasting literary value in part because of its narrative incongruities and the duplicitous nature of its narrator, Nick Carraway. Nick is more than an unreliable narrator; he is hopelessly dishonest and hypocritical. His deception is developed in numerous subtle ways as the story unfolds and folds back on itself and the reader learns more about Gatsby and Nick. Only late in the story does the reader begin to question Nick's contradictory statements and wonder about his motives. Nick's real role, as the main character/narrator, is to advance his own stylized version of the quest for capturing the elusive, ever vanishing American Dream--individual wealth, power, social position, immortality--for present and future readers, till the end of time. (NKA)

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Deconstruction Literary Theory and A Creative Reading of *The Great Gatsby*

Shock waves caused by Jacques Derrida's explosive philosophy of deconstruction, which he first presented in the introduction to his 1962 translation of Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," are still reverberating through European and American literary circles (*Contemporary Authors* 124: 112). In 1966 the now famous French philosophy professor, literary critic and prolific author "delivered a decisive critique of structuralist thought" in the presentation of his controversial paper, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," at a conference called to introduce structuralism to the United States at Johns Hopkins University (Leitch 267). The following year he published three major works on his theory of deconstruction: *Of Grammatology, Writing and Differance,* and *"Speech and Phenomena" and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs.* He further developed his theory in a second set of major works published in book form in 1972 and in many other writings during the last two decades. Gayatri Spivak's 1976 translation of *Grammatology* facilitated the transmission of deconstruction to the realm of English-speaking readers. In America, Yale Critics who embraced and popularized Derrida's theory "hailed deconstructive thought as the solution to the intellectual stagnation in which literary criticism was mired after its wholesale adoption of the new criticism in the 1950s and 1960s" (Crowley 22). However, resistance to the contemporary literary theory through the mid-1980s took the form of a "bitter debate" that enlivened literary journals and MLA meetings (White 285). The debate continues even today, with traditional literary critics rejecting deconstruction as nihilistic and progressive critics and composition teachers enthusiastically embracing the theory because of its philosophical and pedagogical parallel with the process-oriented methods of New Rhetoric.

Poststructural literary critics define deconstruction as a strategic reading process that is a creative, rather than passive, and vigorous interaction between the reader and the text (287). Although deconstructionists reject psychology as a purely subjective basis for reading literature, they do believe the reader "joins with or even replaces the author as the creator of meaning," which resides in a text. "The text offers only a guide to the reader, as if it were a musical score which must be performed or (to use a favorite term of these theorists) 'played' in order to become real" (288). In contrast to the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida "maintains that the meaning of language is elusive and hidden, and that no definitive interpretation can be established for a written text" (*Academic* 2: 122, 1990). Essential principles of the creative reading process are

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described below in this essay and are exemplified in a deconstructive interpretation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* a work with which most literary Americans are familiar.

Derrida's poststructuralist conjectures are a direct response to structuralism and an attempt to undermine the basic, traditional assumptions of Western cultures that practice logocentrism, "the human habit of assigning truths...to spoken language, the voice of reason, the word of God" (*Academic* 7: 76, 1991). Logocentrism stems from the Greek term *logos,* identified with God, "the absolute source of truth, which Derrida claims to be an illusion" (Haney, 2: 243). Derrida argues that logocentric theories "are not universal truths whose absolute source is the human 'voice' but rather social constructs that are subverted by the relativity of the very language through which they find expression" (2: 423). He particularly objects to speech being favored over writing, advancing "graphnocentrism" as a writing theory that allows infinite possibilities in the interpretation of meaning, which is in each case determined by context. He contends that logocentrism "generates and depends upon a framework of two-term oppositions" such as (TRUTH/lie, MALE/female), with the first of each pair being unfairly favored (*Academic* 7: 76, 1991). "Logocentrism thus assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first" (Culler 93). "In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy," Derrida explains in *Positions.* "One of the terms dominates the other, occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy" (56-7). The term deconstructionism arises from his desire to "deconstruct, or undo, a text, to take it apart in order to analyze its meaning, which according to Derrida can never be unequivocal" or absolute (Haney 2: 422).

"The notion of a single, authoritative, traditional interpretation of a literary text" is especially objectionable to Derrida (2: 422). His deconstructive manner of engaging the text is to read with suspicion, using a strategic reading device (Crowley 1). This device, which comprises a set of rules, allows the reader to look "for places in the text where a writer's language mis-speaks her, where she loses control of her intention, where she says what she did not 'mean' to say" (7). There are hidden meanings in a text that indicate thoughts and ideas which the writer is not aware of, and these thoughts and ideas may be in contrast to the surface meaning which we have become accustomed to seek as readers. As an example, Derrida demonstrates in *Of Grammatology* that anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's "praise of the Brazilian Indian is marked by precisely the ethnocentrism it sets out to deplore" (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 24: 140). Derrida's intention is to expose the "gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies in a given text..." and to expose the way a text "folds back in on itself in very interesting and complex ways which produce meanings beyond the author's conscious control" (Crowley 7-8).

The derangement of familiar ideas in the interpretation of a text through the use of deconstructive techniques causes psychological discomfort for some literary critics and scholars. Even though deconstructionists engage in extensive word play, using "incessant and extended punning" and "self-reference" (49), there is a disquieting, even disturbing, element in approaching literature in the deconstructive sense because the reader must assume from the outset that he or she is being deceived by the author's words. Jonathon Culler explains in his book about Derrida's philosophy that "the practioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it" (86).

In the early stages of the creative reading process, one sets out not to discern meaning from the text, but to deconstruct the text to *create* meaning. According to Susan Brill, assistant professor of English at Bradley University, the first step in the application of the theory is "to find a construct (an idea or concept) evident in the text showing a duality or an opposition in a hierarchy and find quotes to back it up." The reader must then "turn or imagine the construct upside down (invert it/subvert it); deconstruct it to indicate the reverse/converse/opposite meaning; find evidence in the text of a causal link that indicates position, prominence; and deconstruct the link in terms of weakness, marginalization, trivialization, devaluation." The third step is "to find an aporetic struggle, a fissure, an irresolvable dilemma." The reader "takes note of what is no longer sure, solid, true, definite; and the deconstructed construct, through the process of erasure, becomes merely a trace." During the final stage, "the deconstructed construct is then reinscribed, and the entire process of deconstruction is dependent upon the initial construct."

The reader sets out to find the dualities and deceptions, the gaps and cracks in a text, expecting all the while to find a deep fissure that Derrida characterizes as the "abyss." The reader searches for the "*differance*," Derrida's term for describing "the tendency of meaning to inhere in items which differ from one another..." (Crowley 55). This disorder may unsettle the reader, but greatly expand his or her knowledge and/or understanding of the text as its meaning is not destroyed but redefined through the "reinscription" stage of the reading process. According to Culler, "an opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned but reinscribed" (133). The trace of what remains of surface meaning plays between two or more designated dualities of opposition. This process is easily illustrated through the employment of deconstructionist strategies to analyze *The Great Gatsby*, a work of lasting literary value in part because of its curious narrative incongruities and dualities and the duplicitous nature of its narrator.

In telling his version of the story of Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway presents the audience an unsettling dilemma that is ultimately irresolvable using traditional methods of literary criticism. After suspending belief and literally accepting the narrator's calmly delivered assertion that

"Gatsby turned out all right" (Fitzgerald 2), even the most sophisticated readers are perplexed near the end of the novel when we must "witness" his violent death. Carraway leads us to expect developments that allow Gatsby to triumph in the end; but our expectation is subverted by Nick's reticence in the treatment of Gatsby's mysterious origins, by his romantic treatment of Gatsby and Daisy's relationship as young lovers, by his late presentation of Gatsby's flawed character, and by his deceptive observations of a series of events in which he participates as a character and describes as the book's narrator. "Squeamish provincialism," the term Nick uses to describe his aversion to the tragic outcome in the novel (120), or in other words, the naive or sentimental desire for a happy ending, has little to do with the uneasy disappointment the reader feels when Gatsby is killed. But few readers realize that their vague sense of disillusionment is directly attributable to Nick Carraway's deception.

Nick is more than an unreliable narrator; he is hopelessly dishonest and hypocritical. An amoral relativist, he adopts the position that is most comfortable or interesting at any given time and expects us to believe him and even sympathize with him because, unlike Gatsby, he comes from a "prominent, well-to-do" family and describes himself as "tolerant" and nonjudgmental. In the opening paragraphs of the novel he says he is "inclined to reserve all judgments," but he later admits that he did judge Gatsby. The last time he saw Gatsby alive, Nick compared him favorably to Daisy and Tom: "They're a rotten crowd.... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." But he tells us, "I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end" (103). His deception is further developed in numerous subtle ways as the story unfolds and folds back on itself and we learn more about Gatsby and Nick. For example, Nick says, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (39); yet, he is a man who moved to the East Coast to avoid telling a woman he did not want to marry her. Nick is not an innocent bystander: He socializes with Tom and his mistress while also assuming a position of loyalty to Daisy and Gatsby. He is a man who entered willingly into a conspiracy with Jordan Baker to bring Daisy and Gatsby together, knowing Gatsby was out to destroy the Buchanans' marriage. This is a man who sneaks up to Daisy's house and peeks through the kitchen window to watch her and Tom for Gatsby after Myrtle's death and later describes them as "conspiring together" (97). We do not realize until late in the story that this "honest" man is, in actuality, dishonest. And then we begin to question Nick's contradictory statements and wonder about his motives.

A duality of main characters appears when one juxtaposes the words "Gatsby" and "Nick" as opposites in Derrida's logocentric prescriptive form: GATSBY/nick. Gatsby is favored in the title as the novel's main character, but Nick is the survivor who is finally favored: He lives to tell

the story. This subtle inversion allows Nick to "replace" the main character. The privileged first form, Gatsby, is ultimately placed under erasure by the second form, Nick. The duality that exists in Nick's character--narrator and writer--places him in a position to destruct Gatsby's character even as he constructs it on the book's pages. As narrator, Nick at first appears to defer to Gatsby's memory by suggesting admiration is the reason for writing the story; but he later demonstrates "unaffected" or sincere "scorn" for Gatsby, which clearly indicates a different relationship than is presented at the beginning of the book. The result of this contradictory attitude represents a "*differance*" in meaning. Gatsby, however, is reinscribed through Nick's memory and his process of writing, and the story is what remains as a "trace" of the original main character.

Thus, through the use of deconstructive reading techniques, we find a new insight into the irresolvable dilemma: Everything turns out *all right* for Nick; everything turns out *all wrong* for Gatsby. Although Gatsby and Nick both "live on" in a sense in the novel, it is Nick who finally achieves his dream by ascribing to the literary tradition of immortality through the written word. Nick hints at his literary aspirations and his particular version of the American Dream in the first chapter when he describes his career preparations early in the summer of 1922:

> There was so much to read....I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew. And I had the high intention of reading many other books besides. I was rather literary in college--one year I wrote a series of very solemn and obvious editorials for the *Yale News*--and now I was going to bring back all such things into my life.... (3)

Nick tells us he set out with professional and personal goals--with the dual purpose of becoming a bond salesman and a "well-rounded man" of letters. He also subconsciously alludes to his interest in writing by misusing literary terminology in at least one scene containing his dialogue: Instead of using the term "slander," which would be correct in reference to a spoken slur, Nick uses the term for a written slur. He says, "It's a *libel* (our emphasis). I'm too poor," in responding to a question from Daisy and Tom about hearing of his engagement to "a girl out West" (14). "Of course I knew what they were referring to, but I wasn't even vaguely engaged," Nick lies. "The fact that gossip had *published* (our italics) the banns was one of the reasons I had come East." Later he tells us he had been writing letters once a week to the girl, whom he describes as a friend, and signing them "Love, Nick" (39).

Nick ends up reinventing his role and usurping Gatsby's privileged position to become the protector and advancer of the "last and greatest of all human dreams" while Gatsby's fading romanticized dreams become rather trivial, superficial, and self-serving (121). Gatsby falls into

the abyss. Nick lets us know that Daisy was not worthy of Gatsby's love and dreams after all: She and Tom are careless people who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (120). And evidently, Nick judged Jordan Baker as unworthy of his love. At their last meeting, Jordan chastises him for his dishonesty and his hypocritical reaction to the accident and the murder, which caused him to abruptly end their affair: "I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess," she tells him. "I thought you were rather an honest, straight-forward person. I thought it was your secret pride." Nick, who describes himself as angry and still half in love with her, peevishly replies, "I'm thirty...I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (119). But he does lie to himself and to the reader. In his contradictory statement, which is odd but in character with his relativistic nature, he admits that he is dishonest.

At the very end of the novel, Nick retrospectively positions himself to look forward to his own future, his own hopes, while still reflecting on Gatsby's shattered dreams:

> I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way...and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him....
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... (121)

Nick may present himself as being initially reluctant to capitalize on what he earlier describes as his "interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (2); but it is his bittersweet fate and, we think, his main intention from the beginning of the novel to "repeat the past" by reinventing and expressing in writing what he terms as "riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (1). Nick does not glorify love, romance, or Gatsby after all. His real role, as the main character/narrator, is to advance his own stylized version of the quest for the capturing the elusive, ever vanishing American Dream--individual wealth, power, social position and immortality--for us and for all future readers, till the end of time. The compelling, dualistic metaphor in the last line of the novel suggests that Nick could do nothing else: "So we beat on," he explains, "boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (121).

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We would like to share our research with other student-scholars who are interested in Fitzgerald's novel and/or in one of the most influential literary philosophies of this century.

We believe our paper would be valuable to scholars at all college levels using ERIC to do English Studies research related to these two literary topics for at least four reasons: The paper contains 1) an analysis of Fitzgerald's duplicitous narrator, which is closely based on the text and developed solely from our interpretation as readers; 2) an explication of Jacques Derrida's complex, controversial theory of deconstruction; 3) a detailed list of the steps of Derrida's creative reading process which are used to apply the theory to a literary work; and 4) a complete research paper model that exemplifies the MLA style format with parenthetical documentation and a works cited listing.